



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2005 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from Olmec Times to the Present

Multiple Perspectives on the Spanish Invasion of Mexico

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The study of Cortés' invasion of Mexico reveals characters that are larger than life. Hernán Cortés, Doña Marina, his interpreter, and Montezuma prove to be extraordinary people. Their remarkable story speaks from various primary documents from Spanish and Native American sources. Many times history texts do not reveal the origins of historical data. Fascinating stories and their sources can become 'generalized', marginalized, or omitted entirely from the historical survey in a quest to accommodate an all inclusive correctness. Thanks to the variety of primary sources and scholarly work available, the Spanish invasion can be revisited in light of modern social mores. Cortés wrote five letters to the King of Spain. From his letters we learn what he saw and accomplished. Perhaps, most importantly we gain a cultural perspective on the Spanish and the Mexica- the natives at the time of the Spanish invasion. Bernal Díaz, a subordinate of Cortés wrote and revised a memoir later in his life from which we gain additional perspective on Cortés, Doña Marina, Montezuma, and Díaz. We gain an additional and Native-American perspective from the work of Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar, who in the 1560's, compiled native accounts of the invasion as part of a twelve book encyclopedia. These sources are the basis of at least some of the scholarly work of secondary authors such as Hugh Thomas, Anthony Pagden, Gérard Chaliand and Tzvetan Todorov. Through these sources and secondary authors, teachers and students can discover the complexities of the Aztec world, the conquistador's culture of greed and power, and the means by which the Columbian Exchange spearheads into mainland Mexico. Moreover, current and universal issues of governance, social strata, economy, religion, and gender can also be investigated. Exploring works by these authors through proven reading strategies will provide high school students and teachers a vehicle by which to gain insight into the multiple perspectives of the major players and the primary issues of the Spanish invasion of Mexico and sharpen reading skills. In this unit, primary and secondary accounts of the major players and events are offered for review with lessons that emphasize reading strategies. The target audience is grades 9-12. Some material may be appropriate for middle school.

(Recommended for History, grades 9-12.)

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